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# *The Status and Role of Motherhood in Ancient Israelite Narratives: The Barren Wife Stories and the Book of Ruth*

by

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23/1/18

For John J. Conway, my father

and Isabelle Ashur Clare Meade, my daughter.
"To you from failing hands we throw the torch, be yours to hold it high" - John McCrae

Abstract

Being a mother was one of the most important roles a woman could fulfill in ancient Israelite society. It was a primary source of prestige within her community. Hence, being childless was a source of personal anguish and social stress for any married woman. The barren wife stories and the Book of Ruth effectively communicate the direct impact the role of motherhood (or lack thereof) had on the level of economic and social status a woman could achieve in such an honour-based society. This thesis examines in detail six barren wife stories in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, as well as the Book of Ruth, and traces the various stages of the transformation of a barren wife or childless outsider into an honoured mother and the divine purpose revealed in such a transformation.

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## Abbreviations

| | |
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| BA | Biblical Archaeologist |
| BA Rev | Biblical Archaeology Review |
| BASOR | Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research |
| BDB | The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon |
| Bib. Int. | Biblical Interpretation |
| BR | Biblical Research |
| BTB | Biblical Theology Bulletin |
| CANE | Civilizations of the Ancient Near East |
| HTR | Harvard Theological Review |
| JAAR | Journal of the American Academy of Religion |
| JBL | Journal of Biblical Literature |
| JBQ | Jewish Bible Quarterly |
| JESHO | Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient |
| J Fem St | Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion |
| JSOT | Journal for the Study of the Old Testament |
| JSS | Journal of Semitic Studies |
| KBL 3 | *Lexicon in veteris testamenti libros* 3 |
| OTE | Old Testament Essays |
| RB | *Revue Biblique* |
| Ref Th R. | Reformed Theological Review |
| SBL | Society of Biblical Literature |
| SJOT | Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament |
| VT | *Vetus Testamentum* |

**Overview**

This thesis explores the barren wife motif. Initially the topic intrigued me when, as an undergraduate, my first attempt at motherhood coincided with the writing of a paper that compared the differing portrayals of Hannah in the Septuagint and the Masoretic text. The exercise led me to discover that the image of the barren wife did not represent an isolated characterisation but was, instead, an actual motif. At the same time I developed an interest in the portrayal of motherhood in the Hebrew Bible and the manner in which the barren wife motif related to it and the characterisation of women in general. While working on this thesis, my most surprising discovery pertained to the patronage aspect of families. Training in Roman History and Archaeology allowed me to understand the relationship between patrons and clients had from a political perspective. My investigation expanded this vantage point to include the idea of a patronage relationship between husband and wife, as well as other members of the family. The ability to view religion as a patronage system facilitated the formulation of a more familial understanding of the concept. Hopefully this thesis will lead my readers to take a journey similar to the one I have taken.

**Introduction**

Of all the roles that men or women can play in society, a few are chosen by authors in any given period to form the fund of stock characters employed in the narratives they create. Stock characters are used in literary narratives in order to define a mode of standard conduct --positive or negative-- for the audience, while deviations from that norm are used to highlight certain themes or perhaps to introduce new ones. A stock character can be defined as a character with a fixed, small number of traits that do not change in the course of the action.[1] The stock character is defined primarily in terms of its social role and role within the action, and recurs in numerous narratives of a specific

[1] M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Harcourt Brace College Publications: 1993, Sixth Edition.

literary genre. Many of the female characters in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible narratives are of this kind with the role of the mother being one of the most important in their portrayal. But even with the relative paucity of female participation in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, this study would become unmanageable if all mother figures in the Hebrew Bible were to be taken into account. Consequently, only relevant narratives in the Pentateuch, in the so-called Deuteronomistic history books from Joshua to Kings and the Book of Ruth will be taken into account. Moreover, certain stories will be discussed in more detail than others.

How does one see a mother? Most of us would automatically refer to the mothers we know-- our own mother, others in the family, ourselves, perhaps even friends, but what characteristics comprise a picture of a mother? The first characteristic would, of course, be biological. Beyond this physical fact, perceptions of what being a mother consists of are culturally constructed. In many cultures, literature and social standards help to define what society at large deems to be required, acceptable, and desirable as characteristics of motherhood.

Marriage is the social institution that leads to motherhood and thereby status in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. Marriage for any other reason than to produce children-- i.e., to turn the wife into a mother as well-- is not even entertained as a possibility in the world view of the implied author/s of these narratives. This is evidenced by the fact that if children are not produced within a 'reasonable' amount of time, the wife is then considered to be barren.[2] It is also generally assumed that the husband and wife have been actively trying to have children because the family[3] is the most important unit of ancient Israelite society. Even prostitutes who are not wives, of course, are portrayed not only as being mothers but also as desiring to become mothers, to the point of murder in order to

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[2] Interestingly enough, the possibility that the husband may be responsible for the infertility is not considered.

[3] This includes not only the modern North American concept of the nuclear family but also the full familial group as encompassed by the term 'kinship'.

fulfill that wish.[4] Daughters often become of literary interest only when they are old enough to produce children of their own, at which time, if they are needed for the narrative to move forward, they are suddenly interjected and appear as full grown adults.[5] To be even more specific, women are not often portrayed in any other capacity than that relating to their ability (or inability) to produce sons. As a result, while there are many birth stories of special sons, there are none for daughters in our corpus.[6]

With motherhood being such an essential aspect of a woman's role, a woman's inability to have children becomes a highly marked feature. The literary manifestation of this situation is the barren wife motif, of which our corpus contains no fewer than six: Sarah,[7] Rebekah,[8] Rachel,[9] Hannah,[10] the Shunammite woman,[11] and Samson's mother/Manoah's wife.[12]

Besides its human interest, the barrenness motif is also important in relation to the religious and cultural aims and reflections of the Hebrew Bible's writer/s. The ideological role of the barren wife motif is to stress the importance of the Lord and his exclusive role in the fertility of human beings and the fertility of the world in general. This occurs against a common background in which polytheism was both the norm in most if not all of Israel's surrounding cultures and widespread even among the Israelites themselves.[13]

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[4] Cf. 1Kings 3:16-27.
[5] A few exceptions include Michal, Jezebel, and Athaliah.
[6] One exception is Dinah (Genesis 30:21) whose birth is mentioned in one quick sentence only because she is soon subjected to a rape (Genesis 34), which otherwise would have been her only introduction into the narrative.
[7] Genesis 18:9-15; 21:1-7.
[8] Genesis 25: 21-23.
[9] Genesis 29:31; 30:1-2.
[10] 1Samuel 1.
[11] 2Kings 4:8-17.
[12] Judges 13.
[13] For archaeological remains of polytheism and its relation to Israelite monolatry or monotheism see especially William G. Dever, "Material Remains and the Cult in Ancient Israel: An Essay in Archaeological Systematics", *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday* Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Connor, editors, Eisenbrauns: 1983, p571-587; --"The Contribution of

Therefore, this option was specifically removed and the responsibility and the glory were ascribed directly to the Lord. The narrative shows that the Lord is aware of certain problems that arise within His sphere of influence and not only does He solve these problems, but He anticipates them and plans around them. There are some recurrent features of the barren wife motif which serve to highlight the action of the Lord behind the actual action of the narrative through the use of type-scenes.[14] Type scenes are similar to stock characters in that they are of limited scope and disclose few characteristics, which allows for the introduction of a motif whose implications are commonplace to the audience.

The Book of Ruth can be viewed as a modified elaboration of the barren wife motif because it carries with it many of these recurrent features. Like the barren wife, Ruth too is not supposed to have a child. The reason, however, is not physical deficiency but a social one. With the death of her husband, Ruth is also left fully open to the possibility of ill treatment at the hands of others. Not only is she a childless widow, an unenviable situation as other parts of the Hebrew Bible indicate,[15] but also a foreigner, and as such she is left unprotected by anyone. She is likely to suffer both physical and economic abuse because of her lack of both familial connections and an economic base.[16] The lack of familial connections is very important because unlike modern times, the state did not take care of the unfortunate[17]-- the family did. Removal from the family circle

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Archaeology to the Study of Canaanite and Early Israelite Religion" and John S. Holladay, Jr. "Religion in Israel and Judah Under the Monarchy: An Explicitly Archaeological Approach", *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross,* Patrick D. Miller, Jr., Paul D. Hanson and S. Dean McBride, editors, Fortress Press: 1987

[14] For a discussion of type-scenes, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Basic Books: 1981, Chapter 3.

[15] Psalms 94:6-7, Isaiah 10:2.

[16] Paula S. Hiebert, " 'Whence Shall Help Come to Me?': The Biblical Widow", *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, Peggy L. Day, Editor, Fortress Press, 1989, *passim.*

[17] Proverbs (22:16, 22-23; 29:7) does state that a good man should provide for the widow, the orphan, and the poor. Psalms 68:9; 94:5-7; 146:9 shows the need for the Lord to fill the role of protector.

certainly spelled poverty and hardships if not actual death. The fact that she is not an ordinary foreigner but one that had not yet been seen to accept the ways of Israel, although she had been married to an Israelite, could leave her open to still more abuses. Those who might take pity on the plight of an Israelite widow might not be so kind to a foreign one. However, as in the barren wife motif, Ruth is rewarded for her loyalty to Naomi and her people, that is the Israelites (and thereby the Lord) --a loyalty which coincides with the Lord's already predetermined purposes to eventually provide Israel with David and the kingship[18]-- by allowing her to give birth to an extremely special son, whose conception requires divine intervention. Upon attaining adulthood this son would become a leader in Israel in some capacity. In the barren wife motif, as we have seen, the obstacle to full membership in the community is the physical inability of the woman to produce a child but the need to conform to the norms of society is there for both Ruth and the barren wife.

Both the barren wife motif and the story of Ruth as a variation on this motif highlight the societal roles of women and the status associated with each of these roles. The discussion which follows will debate in detail the ramifications of what both the barren wife motif and the variation on the motif represented by the Book of Ruth mean to the literary portrayal of the mother in the Hebrew Bible.

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[18] This is the world view of the writer/s.

## Chapter 1: Motherhood and Barrenness in Hebrew Bible Narratives: A Cultural Historical Perspective

Women in any society play many roles and fulfill many functions. One of the most common of these roles is the mother. Although many women throughout the world have become biological mothers, the attributes that are associated with motherhood in each case depend on the particular world view of each society. Motherhood is a social construction, not a biological fact and as such is constrained and redefined by time and place. Thus, apart from the physical act of having a child, what constitutes motherhood in ancient Israel for example, is quite different from a modern North American definition of motherhood. While the Hebrew Bible contains many different portraits of motherhood, most share a large number of traits, likely because they stem from the same shared cultural heritage, which serves as the norm of the patriarchal narratives. Let us now look at these shared traits.

### 1.1 The Mother Role as Cultural Construct

#### 1.1.a The Innate Desire of Women to have Children

The authorial voice/s presents the desire of women to become mothers as universal within society. The possibility that a married woman might not want to bear a child is not a part of his portrayals of womanhood. Understandably, in order to support his own view, the authorial voice glosses over certain facts about the dangers inherent in childbearing at that time. Without the intervention of many modern medical techniques, the extreme youth of many mothers,[19] and the wear-and-tear of many successive pregnancies and miscarriages, gave rise to many situations in which a woman's health and

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[19] See Ross S. Kraemer, "Jewish Mothers and Daughters in the Greco-Roman World", *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*, Shaye J.D. Cohen, editor, Scholars Press: 1993, pp104-105 Assuming that marriage would precede most pregnancies, the average age for marriage is about 15 for women, coupled with women's relatively low age expectancy, many mothers-- especially first time mothers, would be very young. See also Martha T. Roth, "Age at Marriage and the Household: A Study of Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian Forms", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29(1987) 715-47.

even life, as well as the child's life, may be in danger. Despite these realities, Rachel is the only woman in Genesis that dies in childbirth.[20] The authorial voice intentionally hides the fact that many women in the ancient Near East died as a result of producing offspring. His intent is to glorify the institution of motherhood to the point where it would be inconceivable that married women would want to forego producing children- that is, the women should feel that all the problems associated with childbearing are not a consideration.

Attributing the desire for motherhood to all women at all times has the effect of forcing even those who would choose not to have a child to do so only because society dictates it as proper. In the story of the two prostitutes,[21] one of the women is portrayed as capable of stealing the other's child just so that her desire to be a mother could be fulfilled. This desire for motherhood is shown as though it were an innate drive which must be satisfied, even if the result was the death of the baby through division. In short, men are doing women a favour by giving them children and allowing this desire to be fulfilled before it becomes destructive.[22] The role of motherhood is pictured as so important to women themselves that even women who are described as members of one of the lowest strata of society experience this desire.

1.1.b Motherhood and Status

Both motherhood and marriage are methods through which women are able to increase their relative status in society, because it is through these two roles that women increase the honour of their household. Motherhood and marriage are also the two ways in which almost every woman is able to raise her individual standing in the community. Consequently, the system reinforces itself: women marry and have children, especially sons, not only because it is expected of them but also because it is one of the

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[20] Genesis 35:16-19.
[21] 1Kings 3:16-23.
[22] It must be remembered that the main thrust of this particular story is not the motherhood role of the prostitutes but the wisdom of Solomon.

only methods by which they can contribute to the honour of their families within society in general, while at the same time acquiring great personal honour as well.

1.1.c Only a Legal Marriage Makes Mothers: Patriarchy

First and foremost, motherhood is associated with legal marriage. The authorial voice/s emphasize(s) legal marriage because of the essentially patriarchal concern with legitimacy and inheritance matters. Illegitimate children were produced in ancient Israel. Logic alone would dictate that this is so, but we also have a few narrative examples from the Bible in which women who are not married have children. The two prostitutes who asked Solomon to intervene in their dispute were probably unmarried because of their profession and yet both of them were mothers.[23] Jephthah's mother did not have a husband, a fact which caused him great problems in his quest for legitimacy.[24] Bathsheba, the wife of one king and mother to another, not only had a child out of wedlock but she was also married to someone else (Uriah the Hittite) at the time.[25] However, it is important to note that the particular characteristics of illegitimacy attached to these mothers are not found in any of our texts. This absence is an indication of the moral questions which the author of our text attempts to address. The authorial voice wishes to have all mothers produce children within the confines of marriage simply in order to put an end to the question of illegitimacy in the lineage of Israel.

This emphasis on all mothers as forming part of a legitimate marital arrangement is seen in the need to legalize the status of the handmaidens when they are called in to breed children for the husbands of their mistresses. This legalization, however, is not for the benefit of the mother or with the intent of defending her rights but is meant rather to maintain the rights of the children as legal children of their father. Consequently, all the sons born of the patriarch are recognised as "his", regardless of who their mother is.

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[23] 1Kings 3:16-23.
[24] Judges 11:1-5.
[25] 2Samuel 11.

That society expects "respectable" women not to have children outside of marriage or through adulterous relations is again a function of the patriarchal concern with the "proper" lineage. Before the advent of DNA testing, the father of a child could always be faked rather easily, involving essentially only the mother's deception, whereas to substitute another mother's child is much more difficult owing to the inherent biology of pregnancy and birth. Therefore, the authorial voice/s are at pains not only to show that the lineage of the patriarchs is not suspect, but also to hold the characters of the patriarchal narratives as models for the behaviour of people, especially women. Consequently, the authorial voice/s develop a portrayal of mothers that reflects their concerns and ideological viewpoint, namely patriarchy, while at the same time, glossing over or completely ignoring some of the realities of motherhood that do not form a part of their picture.

The first step a woman takes on the road to higher social position is to become a married woman. Once a girl reaches the onset of puberty, she is considered of marriageable age, old enough to run a household of her own and also to have children of her own. She is required to have children to perpetuate the memory of and continue the name of her husband after his death. Therefore, the role of motherhood is crucial to the survival and the honour of the entire household. As the only person who is able to bear legitimate children, especially sons, to fill these needs, the wife's status becomes doubly reliant upon the institutions of both marriage and motherhood.

Marriage is important because it is a method of cementing alliances and moving up the social scale through an advantageous union. But one of the most important functions of the marriage bond is to provide legitimate offspring who can legally carry on the name and memory of a man, as well as inherit his property. Because of this legitimacy requirement for the administration of inheritance, a man is not necessarily required to remain in an exclusive relationship with his wife, since any offspring from outside the marriage is automatically disqualified from being able to inherit. On the other

hand, if a man has more than one wife, all children from all wives are legitimate and may be potential heirs. See for example, Sarah's need to declare Ishmael as her adopted son so that Abraham could be provided with a legal heir.[26] The wife, however, must remain exclusive presumably because of the possibility that another man's child might unwittingly be the recipient of an inheritance which does not belong to him. In the worst case scenario, there is always the possibility that a woman might intentionally attempt to pass off someone else's child as her husband's own. In addition, by having sexual intercourse outside of her legal marriage, the wife is also violating her obligations to her husband as her patron, and therefore she would not be upholding his honour.

The ideal of marriage as a way to maintain male exclusivity over females is probably motivated by a theory of conception which continues up to the present day in some parts of the world where an honour-based social structure --very similar to that of ancient Israel-- is still dominant. Carol Delaney in her study of modern Turkish village life provides a modern example of this type of thought. Like our ancient hypothetical examples, and with no knowledge of modern genetics, the male is seen by the village people as providing the essence, the part of being that makes a person a person while a woman only provides the place in which this essence is nurtured and brought about.[27] This is essentially the same manner in which patriarchy sees legal succession: only males can pass on the right to it.[28] Consequently, a woman who wishes to have a high place in society must have incontrovertible evidence of her fidelity to her husband- evidence which most often comes in the form of social avoidance of males who are not relatives.[29] She must also be seen to be publicly maintaining the honour of her husband's family, first by ensuring no other man's child could usurp their property and next by showing that her

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[26] Genesis 16:2.
[27] The view also has ramifications when dealing with the barrenness issue because a woman who is infertile cannot fulfill her role as a mother and therefore cannot be a complete wife. See the discussion in preceding chapter.
[28] Delaney, p36.
[29] Ibid., p40.

husband has chosen her wisely because of her willingness to abide by the rules of society. The woman also maintains the exclusiveness of her husband's family through her (non)action and does not challenge his (exclusive) privileges over her body.[30]

The decisive role of the male in the parenthood and inheritance structure can be further motivated by the views on conception and embryology held in ancient Greek culture but formulated independently of the Hebrew Bible. There were essentially three major theories of the process of conception, all existing roughly contemporaneously: (1) the encephalogenic theory of seed- that the male seed comes from the brain. This view was held by Pythagoras, Diocles and Plato.[31] (2) The Pangenesis theory- that all moist parts of the body produce seed. This theory dominates the Hippocratic Corpus.[32] (3) The theory that seed is formed in the blood through a system of concoction. Women are involved in this process, although the blood they produce becomes "the nutritive soul of the embryo while the male is the sentient soul"[33] This theory was held by Aristotle and Heropolis.

In all three of these theories women are not considered less important than men when refering to the actual "construction" and development of the embryo and its eventual birth, but they are not seen as providing the ultimate essence or spirit that forms the child as a Being. Rather, women provide the place and even the nourishment which allows the child to be formed and to grow. The significant importance placed upon the father's role in conception is further attested by the use of this image in The Eumenides (Part III of the Oresteia) in which a speech by Apollo states "The mother is not the parent

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[30] The privilege of husbands over their wives' bodies would be considered perfectly normal in many parts of the world even today. It is only recently and mostly in the Western world that women are viewed as having exclusive rights over their own bodies. See Deuteronomy 22.

[31] Heinrich Von Staden, *Herophilus: The Art of Medicine in Alexandria*, Cambridge University Press: 1989, pp288-289.

[32] Ibid., pp289-290.

[33] Ibid., p298

of the child, only the nurse of what she has conceived. The parent is the father, who commits his seed to her, a stranger to be held with God's help in safe keeping."[34] The metaphorical comparison often made between women and fields and agricultural fertility in general can be easily understood in the light of such theories.[35]

Post-biblical Jewish theories also seem to be based either upon the same notions as Aristotle's or to come from a similar background of thought. The double seed theory found in many Rabbinic discussions appears essentially to be the same as our third theory of concoction where the woman's contribution to the embryo is blood-- that is, the female seed is blood which has not fully developed into a "seed" while the male contributes sperm proper.[36] The only mention of female seed in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is found in Leviticus 12:2, the explanation for which may be the reason the Rabbis developed the theory of the double seed.[37]

1.1.d The Only Real Mother is a Mother of Sons

Mothers may desire offspring at any cost, but the only children that actually matter are sons. In our corpus there are no birth narratives of females, with the exception of Dinah's, which does not receive anywhere near the literary development accorded to

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[34] *The Oresteia of Aeschylus* Edited by George Thomson, including the work of Walter G. Headlam, Cambridge University Press, 1938. *Eumenides* Lines 661-665.

[35] Carol Delaney, *The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village Society,* University of California Press: 1991. Cf. Koran Sura 2:223.

[36] Pieter Willem Van der Horst, "Sarah's Seminal Emission: Hebrew 11:11 in the Light of Ancient Embryology", *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe,* David Balch, Everett Ferguson, and Wayne Meeks, editors, Augsburg/Fortress Press: 1990 pp296-301.

[37] For more discussion of Jewish or ancient embryological theories in general see also Page du Bois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women*, University of Chicago Press: 1988; Joseph Needham, *A History of Embryology*, Arno Press: 1975 Reprint; John M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, Harvard University Press: 1992; Heinrich Von Staden, *Herophilus: The Art of Medicine in Alexandria*, Cambridge University Press: 1989, pp288-289; Richard Wagner Whitekettle, *Human Reproduction in the Textual Record of Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine During the First and Second Millennium BC,* Yale Dissertation: 1995; J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (Anchor Bible 3, Doubleday,1991) Note #2, pp743-744.

the birth narratives of sons. This may have been motivated by inheritance laws which decreed that only males could inherit and that married sons were to remain within the family,[38] whereas daughters were "married out". If the portrayal of the maternal preference of sons over daughters is representative of reality, it is also possible that mothers depended on those who would remain in her home with the resources to take care of her when she became old or widowed-- a very common occurrence given the usually large age gap between husband and wife. Daughters usually were not able to protect and care for their mothers in the same manner as sons.[39]

1.1.e Adoption Does Not Make a Mother

Significantly, in the formative story of Abraham and Sarah, a "real" mother must be the mother of children that are physically her own. The adoption of another woman's child, in these narratives, seems to result in disaster for all involved, even when the father is the same.[40] One of the reasons why this point is very important is that upper class women had the freedom to order their female servants to produce children for them, and then adopt these children as their own. Lower class women of course did not have such a choice and were thus exposed to a larger number of health risks. Sarah's solution to her inability to bear a child was to have her handmaiden bear one for her and then adopt the

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[38] Mayer I. Gruber, "Private Life in Ancient Israel", *CANE*, Jack M. Sasson, editor, Prentice-Hall: 1995, p647. On instances where provision is made when there are no sons, see Hector Avalos, "Legal and Social Institutions in Canaan and Ancient Israel", *CANE*, Jack M. Sasson, editor, Prentice-Hall: 1995, pp619, 625. In Mesopotamia, women tend to inherit on the periphery of the empire but it is not attested in Babylon or Assyria, see Samuel Greengus, "Legal and Social Institutions of Ancient Mesopotamia", *CANE*, Jack M. Sasson, editor, Prentice-Hall: 1995, p476.

[39] For the issue of inheritance by daughters see Zafrira Ben-Barak, "Inheritance by Daughters in the Ancient Near East", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 25(1980) 22-32; Yochanan Muffs, *Studies in Aramaic Legal Papyri From Elephantine*, E.J. Brill: 1969; M. Stol, "Women in Mesopotamia", *JESHO* 38,2 (1995) 123-144; Raymond Westbrook, *Property and Family in Biblical Law*, Sheffield Academic Press: 1991 Chapters 4, 6, and 7.

[40] Genesis 16:4-6.

baby.[41] This solution is consistent with ancient Near Eastern practice as seen elsewhere[42] but it is impossible within the world of the story. Once Sarah had her own child she saw Hagar's older son as a threat to her younger son's inheritance and desired to have Ishmael and Hagar sent away. The authorial voice is making the point that women cannot put aside their best interests, i.e. to have a powerful son, in favour of the interests of the family or of the father. The patriarchal promise is explicitly tied to the notion of the "proper" mother as well as to Abraham, the father.[43] Abraham does not want to reject one of his sons: from his point of view the family would be stronger if both his sons were to present a united front. In fact, Isaac and Ishmael are portrayed as capable of cooperating, for instance when they play together as children or meet to bury Abraham. It is actually their mothers who are unable to get along.

1.1. f The Mother's Role in Inheritance and Lineage

Because the economy of ancient Israel, like many other ancient societies, is not based upon monetary values but upon land and its produce, the inheritance of land is paramount to the economic survival of the family. Children must be produced in order to keep the land in the family, especially male children because women are not normally able to inherit.[44] Moreover, unlike modern Western societies, there was no social security in ancient Israel. As a result, families were dependent upon their children for support in their old age. This is especially important with regards to women because women are often much younger than their husbands and would therefore be left without resources upon their deaths if they did not have sons.

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[41] Genesis 16:1-5.

[42] Anthony Phillips, "Some Aspects of Family Law in Pre-Exilic Israel", VT 23 (1973) p351; Geraldine Pinch "Private Life in Ancient Egypt", *CANE*, Jack M. Sasson, editor, Prentice-Hall: 1995, pp373-4.

[43] Abraham's children by Ketubah are also not included in the promise. See Genesis 25:1-11.

[44] See note #52, especially Chapter 2.

The mother's role in lineage becomes crucial when the question of inheritance arises. The inheritance question is one issue which makes motherhood such an important part of the status of a woman. The inheritance (and the promise) can only be passed on through the "right" mother. Thus Ishmael, as Sarah's adopted son, was not acceptable as the inheritor of the promise. Ishmael's mother was not only of Egyptian heritage but she was also a servant, characteristics which were not acceptable for the progenitress of the ancient Israelites. The importance of having the "right" lineage is underlined by the fact that Sarah is an Israelite wife to Abraham and also born into his family (she was Abraham's half sister).[45] Sarah's name, meaning "ruler",[46] is also contrasted with Hagar's lower status-- she is to be ruled by Sarah, the ruler. Sarah's place as the progenitress of Israel is thus confirmed as divine right.

1.1.g Motherly Concern with the Promotion of her Favourite Son for Inheritance

The insistence on a biologically related mother and child leads to another common trait assigned to the matriarchs: support of their favourite son (if more than one is present) to the detriment of any other children. Sarah's demand that Abraham banish both Ishmael and his mother has already been mentioned in connection with the promotion of one child above another. She does whatever she can in order to ensure that Ishmael will not receive Abraham's blessing at the expense of Isaac. By so doing, Sarah risks the enmity of Abraham and especially of the Lord if she is wrong in her advancement of Isaac's rights as Abraham's heir.

Rebekah does the same for Jacob. It is she who plots to make sure that Jacob[47] receives Isaac's blessing at Esau's expense. She must even convince Jacob that this deception would be the best thing for him to do. She further assuages his feelings of fear

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[45] Genesis 11:26-30.
[46] *BDB*, p979a, *KBL*3, P930b-931a.
[47] Jacob is described as Rebekah's favourite son, Esau as Isaac's favourite son. (See Genesis 25:28). The mother's favourite son rather than the father's carries the divine promise.

of discovery by taking upon herself the curse that could possibly result from the deception thereby leaving Jacob free of blame, while opening herself up as the one who is responsible and therefore guilty.

**1.2 The Socio-Historical Context of Motherhood: Group Orientation and Status in an Honour-Based Society**

One central value upon which an honour based society rests is group orientation. Unlike the modern North American view of individual welfare as primary, in traditional societies such as ancient Israel the good of the group is paramount. It is often assumed that subscription to a group oriented ideology means that there is no room for the unique identity of the individual. This is simply not true- even with typic and stereotypic scenes and roles in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, individual characteristics are developed. However, these individual characteristics and abilities are encouraged specifically for the improvement of the entire group.[48] Primary among the ways in which society in general encourages the advancement of the group consciousness is the construction of a system in which all members of the group are responsible to all others, irrespective of age, gender and class. This responsibility is shown through *hesed* and functions very similarly to the way in which patronage did in Roman society.[49] In Roman society, members held allegiance to their patron who protected the individual (and his immediate family) in times of need and was responsible for the general well-being of his client as long as the client adhered to his obligations (either social or political) to his patron in a public manner.[50] The basic idea of *hesed* in the patronage sense can be seen on a religious level

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[48] See Lyn M. Bechtel, "Genesis 2.4b-3.24: A Myth about Human Maturation", *JSOT* 67 (1995) 3-26, especially pp5-6.

[49] Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Source Book in Roman Social History*, Oxford University Press: 1988, pp13-17. For a view of the more political aspects of Roman patronage see H.H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome 133 BC to AD 68,* Routledge: 1989 Fifth Edition, Reprinted p6.

[50] Niels Peter Lemche, "Kings and Clients: On Loyalty Between the Ruler and the Ruled in Ancient 'Israel'", *Semeia* 66 (1995) 119-32. Lemche outlines the workings of the patronage system and that of *hesed* on a political and religious level but does not see it in

(the Lord and the people of Israel), on a political level (the king and his people), and even down to a familial level where a wife and children, even adult ones, are required to show allegiance to and accept the patronage of the head of their household-- normally the father-- in return for all the benefits which remaining a member of a family has in traditional societies.

One of the primary ways in which the group benefits from its individual members is through universal adherence to the rules of *hesed*. The reward for moral and legal adherence to these rules is increased honour for the group as a whole in the eyes of others. Because the actions of individuals within the group reflect upon the honour of the group itself, with increased status as the reward, the entire group benefits from ensuring that all members of the group "toe the line", as it were. Secondly, the more honour an individual possesses (or is viewed as possessing), the higher is that person's status within his/her own community.

These dynamics of manipulation of behaviour for honourable status as seen in a larger group, such as a clan, can also be found on a smaller scale within an immediate family. The male head of the household personifies the level of honour bestowed upon the household by others. This level of honour, however, is determined not only by his own actions, but also by the actions of all the people in the household to whom he holds obligations. Each member of the household also derives a certain amount of honour

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a familial level. Instead, he dismisses the family-based model of society as faulty anthropological methodology (pp122-3). He misses the point that the family system itself runs very much along the lines of the patronage system. For instance, a good wife provides children, runs a proper household, etc., for her husband and in turn is provided for by her husband and then her sons when allegiance is switched to them upon his death. For a discussion of God as patron in a New Testament context, see also Bruce J. Malina, "Patron and Client: The Analogy Behind Synoptic Theology", *Forum* 4 (1988) 2-32. For a comment upon the relationship of honour and shame to the patron-client association in the Hebrew Bible, see T.R. Hobbs, "Reflections on Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations", *JBL* 116/3 (1997) p501-503. For the relationship of honour and shame as it specifically affects biblical women, see Renata Rabichev, "The Mediterranean Concepts of Honour and Same as Seen in the Depiction of the Biblical Women", *Religion and Theology* 3/1 (1996) 51-63.

directly from the household name, although their actions also partially reflect their own individual level of honour.

Although it may appear to contradict the preceding discussion, women's actions seriously affect the manner in which the honour of their husbands and therefore the entire families or households is perceived. This results, in part, from the view that wives are the "property" of their husbands and because they are in a patron/client relationship with the head of their household. It is also connected with the concept of the individual as part of a unit. As "property" that can act, speak, and feel, what women do necessarily reflects both upon themselves and on the man who "owns" them. Added to the dimension of group responsibility, women's behaviour can raise and lower both their own status and that of their group as a whole. Their status is entirely dependent upon whether or not the women follow the set, prescribed modes of behaviour determined by the group at large to be proper ways for women to conduct themselves. Any lack of recognition of the husband or head of household as the patron would also serve to lower the wife's status because the dynamics of the patron/client relationship was not kept by her. For a woman to be held in the utmost regard, she must be a good wife, which consists of upholding the honour of her husband's household and of continuing her husband's line by becoming a mother.[51]

**1.3 Motherhood: Economic Aspects**

The need for mothers in ancient Israel as well as in other cultures and other times is obvious. But why does the writer of this corpus of materials stress these particular characteristics in his view of motherhood? Carol Meyers presents a very interesting and well-supported argument in *Discovering Eve*[52] in which she explains the portrayal of Eve in the Garden of Eden stories as being the result of the need for an increase in the work

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[51] Victor H. Matthews, "Female Voices: Upholding the Honor of the Household", *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24(1994) p8.

[52] Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, Oxford University Press: 1998. See especially Chapters 4 and 5.

force. Because the ancient Israelites were opening up new territories in which there were no previous settlements, a larger work force was required to develop the land into habitable areas. The production of children became one of the simplest ways to supply this workforce. Combined with a high rate of infant mortality, disease and war, women must produce more and more children so that enough may survive to eventually enter this workforce. When women were no longer required to help make these areas habitable, they were still required to fulfill the need for a labour force. Thus, women were relegated more and more only to the role of running the household and producing children. Once this happened, it became reflected in later literature produced by elite males as a way of explaining how their own social systems arose.

Another explanation for ancient Israel's need to stress the woman's role as a producer of children is not unique to Israel but is a very common need for all ancient Mediterranean societies. The high mortality rate of infants and young children, at all times in ancient Palestine, required an initially large number of children in order to guarantee that a small number of them would survive into adulthood. This was important from the point of view of inheritance, both material and cultural. Ensuring that as many children as possible survive to the age of majority should also be recognised as ensuring the only viable response to their environment and the large labour force needed for a successful harvest. Large pools of labour are required in a pre-mechanised agricultural economy to keep a farm operational. On the level of the family unit, children are needed to take care of parents, especially mothers with no economic resources, in their old age.

While Meyers speaks specifically about the Garden of Eden stories, her comments are equally important here not because they reflect the same situation but because the corpus which concerns us here is also based upon the same concept that a woman's only

role is to run the household[53] and have children. The authorial voice/s are attempting to set up a situation which encourages women to continue this traditional role rather than explaining one that already exists, as Meyers believes is the case in the Genesis stories. The aforementioned dangers which women faced with exposure to continued pregnancies could have been a great deterrent to many upper class women if they were able to ensure heirs and their roles as mothers through adoption.

Adoption is also known in legal documents to be much more common than this authorial voice has led his audience to believe. Surely adoption was seen as a way of avoiding pregnancy or of rectifying the problem of infertility or a lack of sons within a family. From looking at these particular portrayals, however, it would seem that no family ever existed of non-blood related mothers and children.

[53] Conceivably, women would still want to run the household even if they never had children or the children had grown up because of the power which the holder of this role would wield.

## Chapter 2: The Barren Wife Motif: Issues of Motherhood and Status

The Hebrew Bible writer/s use of the barren wife motif highlights their motives in promoting an exalted view of one particular female role, motherhood, over and above all others.[54] An examination of the various narrative usages of the motif may give an inkling of the writer/s reasons for developing and stressing a world view where women are not only conceptualized in a single manner but are also forced to remain within the confines of that conception.

### 2.1.a Shared Characteristics of the Barren Wife Motif

The two main characteristics of the barren wife motif are evident from the title of the motif alone: the woman must be married and she is unable to produce children naturally. The prerequisite that the woman be married is quite understandable in a culture where illegitimate children were not recognised and the purity of a man's wife was a reflection of his honour. Barrenness of the main character causes the narrative to move forward. The prime motivation for the action is thus an initial lack which needs to be fulfilled. The barren wife desires to completely fulfill her role as a wife by having children and becoming a mother- her expected societal role. Because she is frustrated by her physical inability to have children, she is left with the need to remove her shame by any means at her disposal which she feels may help. In addition, barrenness provides a focal point for the rationalisation that the Lord is the being that controls the world and this forms the third feature of the motif. In our corpus, the barren wife motif is presented in conjunction with the birth narrative and therefore it can also be said that the final feature of the motif is that barrenness is removed and the wife becomes a mother to a son. As we have just seen a key feature is that it is the Lord who is responsible for making the barren wife fertile.

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[54] For instance, the manufacturing of goods to be used in the household, as chatelaine, or even overseer of the slaves/people who work in the household.

## 2.1.b Variable Characteristics of the Barren Wife Motif

### *2.1.b.1The Fertile Co-Wife*

In addition to these four constant features, there are many other qualities which any portrayal of the barren wife may take up, according to the purposes of the particular narrative. For instance, a co-wife may be present but is not required. When the co-wife does exist the barren wife is always the favoured. The favouritism that the husband displays towards his barren wife is there for many reasons. The authorial voice needs to establish a reason for the continuance of the marriage, to show how magnanimous the husband is by not divorcing his barren wife, and to highlight how much he loves her. The voice may also be quietly acknowledging that women are not always solely responsible for infertility.[55] Much of the legal documentation that exists concerning divorce shows that one of the major causes of divorce was actually the inability to bear children.[56] The narrative needs a motivation for maintaining this marriage: it is because he loves her although she cannot bear children. The fertile co-wife also takes away the possibility that the husband might have to divorce his favoured barren wife since he already has sons to inherit. The presence of a fertile co-wife is used both as proof that the inability to produce children is not the fault of the husband but of the barren wife and also to provide a cultural strain which drives the barren wife to want to rectify her situation. The fertile co-wife takes advantage of her ability to bear children to raise her own social status above that of the more unfortunate but favoured co-wife. As the mother of the only heir/s, the fertile co-wife fulfills society's notions of proper behaviour suitable for a wife and as such would be able to increase both her own social status but also that of the husband to the detriment of the status of the barren wife. This external reward factor and the added

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[55] At first glance it may appear that men are portrayed as **never** responsible for infertility. However, the need for the authorial voice to provide the husband with proof of his virility through another wife that can produce children and the lack of husbands, in the real world, who even in extreme old age cannot reproduce, suggest that the authorial voice accepts that men may also be infertile.

[56] See note #39.

bonus of her own future security through her sons leads the fertile co-wife to promote jealousy and rivalry between herself and the favoured, barren wife. When the fertile co-wife presses her advantage and begins to taunt the barren wife about her lack of sons and her failure as a proper wife, such as is found between Hannah and Peninnah, the barren wife becomes more agitated with her perceptions of her failure and her shame in her lack of fertility and her status falls even lower.

*2.1.b.2 The Annunciation Type-Scene*

Another feature which may or may not be present is the annunciation type-scene.[57] This is a scene in which it is announced to either the prospective mother or father that the Lord will gift them with a pregnancy which will produce a special son. This annunciation can either come from a heavenly messenger, as in the case of Samson's mother, a human messenger, such as Eli to Hannah, or directly from the Lord, as is implied when the three visitors who appear to Abraham reward his hospitality by telling him that Sarah will bear him a child. (Sarah also indirectly obtains this knowledge by overhearing what is being said.)

The annunciation serves to ensure that the characters and therefore the audience realise that the barren wife's conception is not because nature took over or human patience and persistence finally won out, but that the Lord was responsible for opening up the barren wife's womb, thereby making it possible for her to have a son. Through His ability and desire to see His promise to Israel fulfilled and as He is the only God, He allowed conception to take place. This is seen in the use of "And the Lord remembered her and opened her womb..."[58] and "And the Lord opened the womb that He had

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[57] A type scene is a scene which is viewed as "typical"-- i.e., representative of a particular characteristic or group of characteristics. The use of such a scene evokes a set of certain circumscribed patterns in the way in which a particular narrative will be laid out because of its recognition factor as "typic". Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* Chapter 3 especially p50 and following.

[58] 1Samuel 1:19b-20a.

closed...".[59] The role of the Lord is being stressed here. That is, no other gods did or could do what He could- control human and nature's fertility. Nor did women have that control over themselves. It does not take much to imagine that barren Israelite women in their distress, desperation and pain might have turned to other gods/goddesses than YHWH to obtain the child they so fervently desired. This prospect is consistent with the discovery of widespread use of fertility figurines in the archaeological record.[60] The possibility that women who would become mothers of Israelite heroes would or could have approached and worshipped these "other gods" in order to increase their own fertility and achieve success by this method was not one that these narratives would want to occur to their audience.[61] The solution to barrenness that both Sarah and Rachel use, the adoption of a child fathered by their husbands and mothered by their maids, is seen to not really be a solution because it is not what the Lord wanted. Sarah was to be the mother of Israel through blood, not adoption.

*2.1.b.3 The Birth of a Special Son*

Each pregnancy of a barren wife results in the arrival of a special son who is often the hero type. This son is extraordinary primarily because his arrival required a particular intervention of the Lord. However, although the birth of a son from a barren mother is always special and the son himself normally goes on to do special things for Israel, this does not have to occur in the motif. It is the explicit emphasis on the Lord's help in the

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[59] Genesis 30:22-23.

[60] See especially Section III: Phoenician and Ancient Near Eastern Religions in *Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean: Papers Presented at the First International Conference on Archaeology of the Ancient Mediterranean*, Anthony Bonanno, editor, University of Malta Press: 1986; Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*, Viking Publishing: 1991, see especially Chapters 11-13; Walter A. Maier III, *Aserah: Extrabiblical Evidence*, Harvard Semitic Monographs, Number 37, Scholars Press: 1986; Miriam Tadmor, "Female Cult Figurines in the Late Canaan and Early Israel: Archaeological Evidence', *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays*, T. Ishida, editor, Eisenbrauns: 1982, p139-173.

[61] John Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105(1986) 385-408.

conception of the son which marks him as unique even before his arrival. The idea that something spectacular has occurred is brought across. This was no ordinary conception, therefore this is no ordinary son. As such, these sons rise in precedence over their full or half-brothers, where present, and become a part of the Lord's plans for Israel. Isaac was designated for greatness even before his conception. Abraham was informed by the Lord that Sarah would continue his line and Isaac's children would be the recipients of the Lord's promise to Abraham. Ishmael was already present and considered Abraham's legal heir. Should not the promise be transmitted through him? Ordinarily yes in a legal sense, but the Lord allowed Sarah to conceive Isaac in her old age and barrenness because it was a part of His plan. Likewise, Hannah is granted Samuel because the Lord has a plan to usher in the kingship, with Samuel acting as the bridge through which the change in governmental form occurs.

## 2.2 The Six Stories

With the major characteristics of the barren wife motif outlined, the discussion will now concentrate upon an analysis of the individual narratives in which the motif occurs and their relations.

### 2.2.a Sarah and Abraham

The first occurrence of the barrenness motif in the Hebrew Bible is in the story of Sarah and Abraham. The narrative mentions that Sarah was "...past the way of women..."[62] and this, combined with the length of Sarah and Abraham's marriage (as reckoned by their advanced age) without resulting offspring implies that Sarah has always been infertile and that the likelihood of natural conception was nil. Although Sarah does not at first have a co-wife, she does acquire one, her handmaid Hagar, when she decides to take it upon herself to find a method of supplying Abraham with an heir.[63] Hagar

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[62] Genesis 18:12-13.

[63] The use of a handmaid to bear children in the cases of an infertile wife is attested in other ancient Near Eastern societies as well. See Geraldine Pinch, "Private Life in Ancient Egypt" *CANE* p374.

bears Abraham his heir and thus becomes the fertile co-wife who functions as a rival to the barren, favoured wife.

The friction which exists between Hagar and Sarah as a result of the birth of Ishmael also calls into play problems between wives of different class levels. This is the only case in our corpus where class differences between the wives become a significant factor in encouraging strife between them. In all the other cases of co-wives it is always the fertile co-wife who antagonizes the barren wife,[64] goading her because she is unable to have children.[65] In this case, it is Sarah who goads Hagar and takes the initiative to force Hagar to leave. This is not because of bragging rights over who is more fertile and therefore a better wife but rather because Hagar was using her status as the mother of the heir to raise up her own status-- at least Sarah feared the potential Hagar had to do such a thing. Like the *gebirah*, Hagar is attempting to increase her power and sphere of influence through that which is achieved by her son. Her promotion of him would achieve the same ends as Bathsheba's machinations did for Solomon, that is the son with no "proper" claim to the throne achieves it over sons who were viewed as more likely inheritors. Although the reasons for the stress between the wives are different, the results are the same. The Lord tells Abraham to do what Sarah tells him in regards to Hagar and Ishmael because the Lord plans to have Sarah's son by Abraham be the recipient of His promise: Isaac is the "right" child. Ishmael does not receive the divine promise. Yet he is not completely forgotten and does become the father of his own people.[66]

The Lord tells Abraham that Sarah will have a child, which Sarah overhears and laughs at because she does not menstruate. However, Sarah does become pregnant because the Lord allows it to happen. Sarah's age and her statement that she could not conceive because she no longer menstruates serve as indicators that the Lord is the one

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[64] 1Samuel 1:6, and to a lesser degree Genesis 30:1a.
[65] Or the handmaids "know their place" and, accordingly, their sons may be received as "minor" members of the family (see Zilpah and Bilhah). See the discussion below.
[66] Ketubah's children by Abraham do not inherit at all.

responsible for Isaac's birth. Only the Lord has the ability to overcome the natural limitations.

2.2.b Rachel

Rachel is the second barren wife seen in Genesis. Like Sarah, she has a co-wife, her sister Leah. In this narrative though, Rachel is the barren, favoured wife but unlike Sarah she is not the wife with the higher status. The interplay of Rachel and Leah concentrates primarily upon the rivalry which must have existed between co-wives for their husband's attentions. Both sisters view their ability to supply Jacob with sons and heirs as indications that they have succeeded as wives. Rachel, after her sister has borne Jacob a number of sons, demands of Jacob that he "... give me sons or I will die".[67] His reply "Am I the Lord that I can do that?"[68] indicates once again the belief that the Lord is the only being responsible for the creation and conception of human beings. Jacob deliberately upbraids Rachel for thinking that he may be able to solve her problem.

Like Sarah, both sisters give their maids to their husband in order to have children through them. Leah has no reason to do this other than to increase the number of children she already has, possibly so that her health is not endangered any more than is necessary. However, Rachel, like Sarah, looks at this as a solution to her problem of barrenness. In contrast to Sarah and Hagar, there is apparently no jealousy between Rachel and Leah and their maids, for the maid's children are counted among the tribes of Israel as both Rachel's and Leah's own. This particular solution is accepted, while Sarah's was not, because it fits into the context of explaining the number of the tribes of Israel. Without adding in the maids' children, the number which must be arrived at could not be explained.[69] Moreover,

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[67] Genesis 30:1b This is probably also a reference to the fact that Rachel would need a son to care for her in the event of her husband's death.

[68] Genesis 30:2b.

[69] In addition, the story identifies the sons who are the most important to subsequent narratives as either Rachel's or Leah's, not those of their maids. For instance, Joseph, Benjamin, Levi, and Judah.

the special son Rachel bears, Joseph,[70] is no more important in the Lord's greater inheritance plan than are his brothers. Unlike Isaac and Ishmael, all of them share in the legacy promised to Abraham by the Lord.

But Joseph does figure into the Lord's immediate plans more prominently than his brothers. After having been sold into slavery by them, Joseph goes to Egypt where he eventually goes into the service of the Pharaoh. Joseph becomes the motivation for how his family and therefore the tribes of Israel arrive in Egypt from whence they will eventually return to the Promised Land.

It is also important to notice that Rachel's other attempt to provide her own solution to her barrenness, namely when she obtains the mandrake root from her sister and essentially trades Leah for Jacob's sexual services, comes to naught.[71] Only the Lord can end barrenness. Leah is not cruel towards Rachel but she hopes that her fertility will at least help her gain her husband's respect as her fertility enables her to be a "good" wife. Rachel fears that without her own children she would be at the mercy of Leah's sons upon Jacob's death. Her greater status as the favoured wife would be supplanted by Leah as the mother of the only heirs. Rachel fears that this would leave her ignored and possibly left to fend for herself. Interestingly enough in this situation, the rivalry between wives is extended to sisters. Rachel is portrayed as believing that her sister would not extend a hand to help her in the event of Jacob's death. In other words, Leah would not let familial ties get in the way of promoting her sons' interests. One is left with the feeling that Rachel not only expects her sister to leave her as prey for the wolves if the chance ever arose but also that Rachel would behave in the exact same manner towards Leah and her sons. This has the effect of maintaining patriarchal alliances while subverting matriarchal ones.[72]

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[70] Later, Benjamin is also born to Rachel.
[71] Genesis 30:14-16.
[72] J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives*, Trinity Press: 1993, p109.

2.2.c Hannah

With Hannah's portrayal as a barren wife, we move out of the patriarchal narratives into the Deuteronomistic historical narratives. Hannah as a barren wife is by far the most interesting because she is the central character in almost the entire narrative, up until Samuel is dedicated to the Lord at Shiloh after he is weaned. Hannah takes matters into her own hands, without asking anyone's permission, and speaks/prays to the Lord, telling him what it was that she wanted. Not even Eli is permitted to know what her vow or her question to the Lord was. Once Samuel is taken up to be dedicated to the Lord, it is Hannah who prepares and makes the sacrifice.[73]

Within the world of the narrative, one possible justification for the centrality of Hannah is that it is her reward for her extreme loyalty to the Lord as the creator and controller of living things. She understood that her fertility problem could be solved only by the Lord. She did not waste time asking Elkanah to do something about her barrenness, only to be rebuked as Rachel was, nor did she use ineffectual human methods to try to make herself fertile.[74] When Hannah could no longer stand Peninnah's merciless baiting that she was somehow less of a wife because of her inability to have a child, Hannah simply asks the Lord, who could put things right, to grant her a son. With the exception of Rachel who dies bearing Benjamin in her second pregnancy, Hannah is the only barren wife to have succeeding pregnancies after her barrenness was removed.[75] Her piety in donating her son back to the Lord before he is even conceived is rewarded by making her the mother of six.

2.2.d Manoah's Wife

The barren wife motif as used in the story of Samson's mother no longer records strife between co-wives. Belief in the Lord's power seems to be the real issue.

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[73] If one follows the MT. The LXX suddenly reintroduces Elkanah in order to make him officiate at the sacrifice.
[74] Such as mandrakes, see Genesis 30:14-16.
[75] 1Samuel 2:20-21.

Accordingly, Samson's mother is not one of two wives but the single, barren wife of a man, Manoah. Samson's mother does not even ask for an end to her barrenness, rather, the Lord's messenger appears to her to give her the news that she will bear a son. The messenger also gives Samson's mother a list of prohibitions that she is to observe so that Samson will be ready for the role which the Lord designated him for, that of a Nazirite, from birth.

One of the interesting features of this narrative is that the messenger appears to Samson's mother twice but, even though begged by Manoah to impart more information to him, the messenger does not give him as much information as he gives to Samson's mother. It is as if the knowledge is for Samson's mother alone, not his father. The episode seems to hinge on the faith of Samson's mother. She must have faith in the validity of the messenger's message: both that she will have a son and that she must follow the specific prohibitions.

The prominence of Manoah's wife and the exclusion of Manoah with regards to the annunciation is the complete opposite of the annunciation to Abraham and Sarah. First, the announcement to Abraham comes from the Lord himself,[76] not from a heavenly messenger as does the announcement to Manoah's wife. More than likely, this is due to the relative importance of the message: it is upon Abraham and his line that the Lord is bestowing the promise. Through Manoah's wife, Israel is receiving a hero to free them from Philistine oppression.[77] While this is no mean feat in itself, it is not quite at the level of the promise and therefore does not merit a visit from the Lord in person, but rather from a representative.

In the Genesis annunciation, Abraham takes centre stage. It is he who is told that he will have an heir, through Sarah.[78] Sarah is not told either by God, as is Abraham, or

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[76] Genesis 17-18.
[77] Judges 13:5b.
[78] Genesis 17:16-22. In a point of law, Ishmael would have been considered Abraham's "legal" heir although he was not born of Sarah.

by Abraham himself that she is to conceive a child in her old age. Sarah discovers what is to happen only because she overhears[79] the conversation between God and Abraham. In this case, the promise is made to Abraham and to Sarah through him, but not to her as an individual in her own right. With Samson's parents, the promise that Samson is to be a Nazirite comes to his mother, not to Manoah, possibly because of the requirement that Samson be pure even before birth. This need requires the compliance of Samson's mother because of biological necessities. She is the one who carries and gives birth to Samson; therefore she too must abide by Samson's prohibitions for that length of time.[80]

Another interesting feature not seen in the other barren wife stories is the absolute lack of any explicit references to sexual intercourse between Samson's mother and Manoah. Within the world of the text, the Lord's ability to control fertility is not explicitly dependent upon the human method of procreation, He can create out of nothing. In the Samuel narrative, the Lord allows Hannah's womb to open up and be able to conceive, but conception is still explicitly associated with Elkanah. "...Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. In due time, Hannah conceived and bore a son."[81]

2.2.e The Shunammite Woman

The Shunammite woman, in contrast to other barren wives, does not even ask for a son. Elisha and his servant decide between them that the most suitable reward for her kindness to Elisha and her faith that he is a man of God is to grant her a son in order to provide her with a protector in her old age.[82] The advanced age of her husband, knowledge of which is so conveniently provided to the reader/audience by Elisha's servant, serves to underline the fantastical nature of this conception. Once again though, the Lord is the centre of the narrative experience because it is He who allows the

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[79] (deliberately?) Genesis 18:10.
[80] Judges 13:4-5.
[81] 1Samuel 1:19b-20.
[82] 2Kings 4:12-17.

Shunammite woman to conceive. He is always the implied 'mover' behind the action. Like the conception of Manoah's wife, there is no specific mention of sexual intercourse, even though it is implied. None of the barren wives conceive through the Lord (that is an "Immaculate Conception"), but the Lord has it fully within His power to remove the obstacles which prevented the wives from having children.

The Shunammite woman's husband plays very little part in the action of this narrative. Elisha sends only for the woman and informs her that she will bear a child[83] -- the husband is not informed. He is not even granted the amount of interaction that Elkanah receives. (For example, Elkanah reaffirms Hannah's vow and abides by her desire to give Samuel up after he was weaned.[84]) When the child becomes ill, he immediately refers the son back to his mother.[85] She is to make the decisions regarding the boy-- without his interference.

2.2.f Rebekah

Rebekah's story, the shortest of the barren wife stories, is even more compact than the Shunammite woman's. The statements that she was barren, that Isaac prayed to the Lord for her, and finally that Rebekah conceived because the Lord granted it are all contained in one short verse.[86] One note of interest is that Isaac, through his prayers to the Lord, does exactly what Hannah had done by going straight to the Lord for help. This is the complete opposite of Jacob, who refused to intercede on behalf of Rachel.[87] Rebekah continues the pattern of the matriarchs first established by Sarah. She is related to her husband's family prior to her marriage and she is the woman through whom the promise will be transmitted from the father to the son. Consequently, Rebekah's pregnancy must be seen as special and unusual, just as Sarah's was, thereby indicating the

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[83] 2 Kings 4:16 The Shunammite woman is not told by Elisha that he has requested a son on her behalf but only that she will bear a son.
[84] 1Samuel 1:22-23.
[85] 2 Kings 4:19-25.
[86] Genesis 25:21.
[87] See both discussions above.

hand of the Lord in the conveyance of the promise. It seems that the motive for compacting Rebekah's barrenness narrative could be the need for the writer/s to make certain that Rebekah's pregnancy with twins, an exceptional event in itself, would be viewed as even more special because of the Lord's help. By announcing Rebekah's barrenness so concisely, the other features of the barren wife motif are quickly called to mind. All of the characteristics discussed above are found in Rebekah's story, including a justification of her double pregnancy. The use of the motif also confirms the legitimacy of the claim of both sons for their inheritance and serves as another divine justification for the enmity between Esau and Jacob, which is delineated by the Lord as early as their gestation.[88] It will have greater effect on the later narratives of Esau's and Jacob's adult lives and their struggle for supremacy with one another with regard to the actual possession of the inheritance. It is also possible that Rebekah's barrenness was interjected at a later time in such a compact fashion because the establishment of the barren wife motif had already occurred but that it was used in order to serve the writer/s in the same manner as was outlined above.[89]

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[88] Genesis 25:22-23.

[89] Mary Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash*, SBL Dissertation Series 91, J.J.M. Roberts, Old Testament Editor, Scholars Press: 1986, pp30-32.

## Chapter 3: Barrenness, Motherhood and Changed Social Status: The Book of Ruth

When contemplating the message of the Book of Ruth, one does not normally think of Ruth as primarily a mother and even less so as one who is initially similar to the barren wife. This lack of recognition of Ruth as a potential mother in her own right is due to the initial emphasis laid on Naomi's lack of male relatives, to which Ruth's identical lack is subordinated for literary purposes.[90] But, both Naomi's lack of protection as well as Ruth's lack of identity and protection are similar to the predicament of the barren wife. And their predicament is solved in the same way- through the birth of a special son to Ruth.

The Book of Ruth is also about a change of status. Every major character in the book experiences a change of status at some point in the narrative. The most dramatic of these status changes affects the female characters and is similar to the change in the barren wife situation as it is portrayed in birth narratives. In all cases, the level of status a woman can obtain is largely dependent upon her relation to men, i.e. her father, her husband, and/or her son(s) and also by the way her own actions reflect upon the integrity of her family in ancient Israel's honour based society.

### 3.1 Ruth's Initial Social Standing: Moab and Bethlehem

#### 3.1.a Ruth's Initial Situation in Moab

Ruth's introduction in the Book of Ruth begins by referring to her as the Moabite wife to one of Naomi's two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, both of whom soon die.[91] Thus from the very beginning, Ruth is characterised by what she lacks, as is the barren wife. She is without security- she is husbandless, with no living male relatives from Elimelech's family in Moab to keep her under their protection and no offspring at all even though she

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[90] See Ruth 4:17.

[91] Ruth 1:4-5. It is known that Mahlon and his brother Chilion will soon die because of the puns found in their names, Chilion meaning failing or pining and Mahlon meaning sickness. See Sasson, p18-19.

had presumably been married to Naomi's son for ten years.[92] Just as Naomi is left in a considerably bad position by the death of her husband and children, so too is Ruth- for although she is still young, she too is a widow (though not an *almanah*) with none of the familial support systems, with the exception of Naomi, left in place in Moab to care for her.[93] Because there was still a member of Elimelech's family alive, Ruth could not "legally" return to her family until she was released by her husband's family, that is in effect a "divorce". But once this release is given by Naomi, Ruth has two different ways which can fulfill her needs: to remain in Moab with her own people and possibly remarry, or to return to Israel with Naomi out of loyalty, despite the future risks that she may incur by doing so. Unlike Orpah, Ruth decides to return to Israel with Naomi, where a support system may still be in place for her mother-in-law and therefore by extension, for Ruth herself. The authorial voice/s wish to stress the familial loyalty and *hesed* manifested in Ruth's decision to stick with Naomi after the latter releases her, but also assumes that his audience/readers would be familiar enough with ancient Israelite institutions to realise that Ruth might benefit from her devotion to Naomi, in material ways as well. Because of the death of her husband's family, Ruth's situation once she arrives in Bethlehem presents her with three needs for which she must provide a solution: economic poverty, social acceptance and increase in social stature.

3.1.b Ruth's Economic Situation

Ruth must be concerned with her material position because with the death of her husband and his male relatives she is left with no visible means of support. Although she follows Naomi to Bethlehem (for reasons of her own), there is no guarantee that she will find a solution to her economic and social problems there. Likewise, the barren wife has

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[92] Ruth 1:4b.

[93] The wife of a dead husband is in complete contrast to modern notions of the institution of widowhood where the wife is married only to the husband and the relationships of their respective families are not necessarily seen as relevant. Paula S. Hiebert, "'Whence Shall Help Come to Me?': The Biblical Widow", *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, Peggy L. Day, Editor, Fortress Press: 1989, p129.

to wrestle with the likelihood that unless she can produce a child she will be faced with the same problems of lack that Ruth has. In one way, Ruth's problems are more severe than those of the barren wife because hers have moved from the realm of mere future probability or possibility into the actual. Like many of our examples of the barren wife motif, Ruth decides to take matters into her own hands and she follows her mother-in-law to Israel. Comparable with Hannah,[94] but not with the other barren wives who do not, Ruth does take the initiative but does not do anything that the Lord does not already want her to do, i.e. her actions are within the perimeters of the authorial voice/s' view of "proper" Israelite religion. She never takes charge of the situation or attempts to change it herself, but, similar to Hannah's request to the Lord to grant her a son, Ruth manoeuvres herself (or is manoeuvered by Naomi/ the Lord?) into a position where her needs will be satisfied and she herself rewarded.

3.1.c Ruth's Social Status

Ruth's social stature is questionable after Mahlon's death. She is referred to as the wife of the dead man[95] rather than as *almanah*. On the surface the difference is subtle--the *almanah* has no living relatives of her husband with whom to maintain her bond, while the wife of a dead man has at least one member of the family alive with whom she can find protection. Since such a member exists, namely her mother-in-law Naomi, Ruth is unable to break her vow to Elimelech's family until such point as Naomi relieves her of it.[96] In normal circumstances, the social position of the wife of a dead man is somewhat better than that of the *almanah*, because she would not be left alone without resources. In the case of Ruth, however, this does not occur because the only remaining member of Elimelech's family is another female, contrary to normal expectations.[97] While residing in

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[94] 1Samuel 1:11.
[95] Ruth 4:5.
[96] Which she does in Ruth 1:11-13.
[97] Ruth 1:3. The narrative begins to refer to Elimelech as Naomi's husband rather than the usual Naomi as Elimelech's wife after the standard introduction formula in v1-2. Once Elimelech is reported as deceased in v3, Naomi is the head of the household and

Moab, both in fact have *almanah* status because, as females, they are unable to provide themselves with enough income (or the equivalent) to make a living.[98]

On the surface, it does not seem as though Ruth has much going for her in Israel after her husband's death. As a potential mate to Israelite men, Ruth did not have much to offer. She did not come with any economic or political advantages to compensate for her foreignness, as did many of the foreign princesses who married into the Israelite community. In addition, Ruth's as yet unproven fertility might also have caused any kinsman who might have considered her youth and her ability to bear sons a reasonable exchange for her upkeep to think twice about his generosity. Rabbinic commentators have taken the view that the fault for the barrenness of Elimelech's family (Orpah, too, was unable to have children), and the ultimate death of the male members lay with Elimelech himself for having left Israel for Moab in a time of crisis.[99] Consequently, it is not the physical ability of Ruth to produce children which is initially the central issue but rather her acceptance of Naomi's God, and Naomi's people's acceptance of her. Once Ruth's loyalty to the Israelites is established, then her fertility becomes important in essentially the same manner as it is for a barren wife.

The reason for the text delaying the fertility issue is the need to establish first that Ruth's children will be children (sons) of Israel not of Moab. As in the case of Sarah and Hagar, where the "right" mother must be established for Israel,[100] the "right" mother must be found to establish the Davidic line. While exogamous marriage is perfectly

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consequently she becomes the grammatical referent. Interestingly enough, this is before the sons have died but can be explained by the fact that we know,through the puns on their names, they will soon die. See footnote #90.

[98] Though Naomi does actually own a field in Israel (as head of Elimelech's family?).

[99] c.f. Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, JSOT Press: 1989, Second Edition, p20; D.R.G. Beattie, "The Targum of Ruth: Translated, with Introduction Apparatus, and Notes", *The Aramaic Bible*, Liturgical Press: 1994, Volume 19, p19, note #10; Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Volume VI, Jewish Publication Society of America: Third Printing, 1946, p416.

[100] Genesis 17:15-22.

acceptable, according to the authorial voice/s, the "right" mother[101] must nevertheless accept the god of the Israelites and subscribe to their social and religious tenets.[102] Ruth is rewarded for her loyalty to Naomi, her faith in the Lord, and her bravery in leaving her own people without a specific promise of acceptance not only by being the ancestress to King David but also by being acknowledged as such, although she is by blood a Moabite.

Ruth has parallels with both Sarah and Rachel because of the concern shown over the proper characteristics needed for the mother of the heir. She is the "correct" mother from whom the line of Kings will descend and she has the blessings of the Lord. It is He who has allowed her to conceive and who is behind every movement in the Book of Ruth, according to the authorial point of view. Therefore it is divine destiny that Ruth gives birth to the ancestor of the Davidic kings.

The characterisation of Ruth found in the Book of Ruth is in many ways very similar to the portrait of the barren wife discussed in the previous chapter. The most important component which connects them is the notion of barrenness. The woman in the "barren wife motif" is portrayed as physically barren. The authorial voice/s characterizes Ruth (but not Naomi) as physically able to produce a child (although we may be led to suspect otherwise for other purposes as we shall see below), but unable to do so because of social circumstances. She is "socially barren". By social barrenness, we refer to the social constraints imposed upon Ruth by ancient Israelite society which prevent her from becoming a wife and mother.

Using the contrast of Ruth's age to that of Boaz is another way of reducing the importance of Ruth's fertility. Instead of having Ruth's fertility or infertility in central position and highlighted as the only possible impediment to conception, Boaz's fertility also comes into the spotlight. Boaz is portrayed as considerably older, and yet no

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[101] Interestingly enough, the child has two mothers who both must be "right", Ruth and Naomi.

[102] This contrasts with the view of foreign wives found in Ezra-Nehemiah. See discussion below.

mention is made of him having any previous children. If the assumption is that Boaz has previously been married and yet Obed is listed in the genealogy of chapter 4 as though he were the first-born of Boaz , then the authorial voice/s imply that Boaz was just as likely to be unable to have children.

But even if Boaz were married before he met or became betrothed to Ruth and even if he were to have children, the hypothetical first wife would have probably functioned as Hagar does in the triangle of relationships between herself, Abraham, and his first wife Sarah. She would still be Boaz's wife and possibly have borne his children even in temporal priority, but Ruth, as the favoured wife from whom the Davidic line shall be raised, would be the "proper" mother and Boaz would choose her son to inherit. Too often, because of the Western world's establishment of the tradition of primogeniture in Mediaeval England, the rights of the first-born are viewed as universally paramount and unshakable.[103] The Hebrew Bible itself shows many instances where the first-born does not inherit.[104] The very need for the father to pass on his blessing shows that there may be some doubt as to who will receive it in the first place. Logic would dictate then, that considerable amounts of latitude were allowed a father when he was to pick his heir. In short, it was not automatically assumed that the eldest son or the son of the first wife would receive the blessing of the father. Greenspahn has effectively explained that the Western, especially English, view of primogeniture as the only inheritance possible is suspect because it does not take into account the realities of the Ancient Near East.[105]

3.1.d Ruth, the Foreigner and Cultural Acceptance

Ruth is portrayed as the epitome of what a woman unable to have a child faces after the death of her husband-- she exemplifies what could happen if that woman were

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[103] Frederick Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible,* Oxford University Press: 1994, pp36-38.
[104] Genesis 17:18-21; 27; 25:31-34.
[105] Greenspahn, Chapter 2.

left alone. Because of patrilocality in general in Ancient Israel,[106] the widow is normally left in a place which may be foreign to her. Because of this she may be left without the possibility of her father or brothers coming to her rescue, a situation which is mirrored by Ruth's move to Bethlehem. The famine forced Elimelech and his family to stay in Moab where Ruth would be close to her family and presumably more likely to call on their help. The movement to Bethlehem serves both to remove Ruth physically from her circle of family and friends,[107] as marriage customs normally do in the Ancient Near East, and symbolically underlines Ruth's movement towards the Yahwistic religion's ideal as it is espoused by the authorial voice/s. It represents her final and complete acceptance of Israelite ways.

At the beginning of the narrative, Ruth is at a social and economic disadvantage due to her childless widowhood, and to her status as a foreigner in the land of Israel. Because foreigners do not, by definition, have any familial relations in the society in which they reside, they do not belong to the system of social support. They are in effect removed from the functioning of the group-oriented society. In ancient Israel, there was also the added complication that a foreigner was automatically assumed not to be a follower of the Israelite religion until proven otherwise. Therefore the exclusion of the foreigner would cover both legal and religious/social spheres of life. Ruth, a childless widow and a foreigner, would be in a doubly unenviable position, with no possible means of maintaining herself in a suitable (or at least survivable) economic position.

Ruth's change in status is obviously much more detailed and developed because it forms the subject of a full narrative rather than being just one motif within a wider narrative. From the perspective of the Israelites, Ruth begins as a foreigner but her status as a foreigner has actually started even earlier. While in Moab, Ruth is in effect a foreigner in her own culture because she marries someone from outside that culture, an

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[106] Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, Oxford University Press: 1988, pp37-40.
[107] Symbolic of matriarchy, perhaps, and thereby women's power.

Israelite. Elimelech and his family are foreigners in Moab, but from their point of view, Ruth and Orpah are themselves outsiders until they completely transfer their loyalties to Elimelech's family. From the point of view of the Moabites, Elimelech and his family are *gerîm*[108] (although they are allowed to keep their religious traditions), and when Ruth and Orpah join their Israelite household they too become *gerîm* despite being natives of the land. This shift in religious allegiance is not stated in the narrative but seems to have occurred with their marriages to the Israelite sons (a typical view of a proper marriage in any case) because when Naomi attempts to release Ruth from her vow to her family, Ruth is told to go back to her gods as Orpah has done.[109]

Once Ruth arrives, with Naomi, in Bethlehem, as a Moabitess she is once again a foreigner.[110] She is viewed as a Moabitess by the people of Bethlehem, regardless of her adherence to Israelite social and religious norms. This will continue until she finally marries Boaz and fulfills her social responsibilities towards Naomi when she surrenders her son to Naomi as her redeemer. From that point on, Ruth is no longer referred to as "Ruth the Moabitess".[111]

The matter of Ruth's foreign origins arises again when analysing her story in light of the various component parts of the barren wife motif. Most of the narratives discussed above have contrasted two co-wives. In the Book of Ruth, the contrast is between sisters-in-law. Ruth is thus contrasted with her sister-in-law, Orpah. Orpah is the daughter-in-law who deferred to Naomi's entreaties to return to her own family and people and god/s rather than proceed with her to Bethlehem- in direct contrast to Ruth.[112] This comparison

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[108] Frank Anthony Spina, "Israelites as *gerîm*, 'Sojourners', in Social and Historical Context" *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday*, Carol Meyers and M. O'Connor, editors, Eisenbrauns: 1983, pp321-335.
[109] Ruth 1:15.
[110] Ruth 1:22.
[111] Ruth 4:13 and following.
[112] Ruth 1:8-15.

is used within the narrative to show how much more loyal Ruth is to her husband's family and thereby to the established Israelite system. This makes her an "extraordinarily good" wife. She does not know how she will be received in Israel by Naomi's people even though she already follows their religion, yet she will not leave her mother-in-law and her responsibilities towards her as a member of her dead husband's family. Obviously, poor Orpah is going to suffer from this comparison regardless of the fact that she is actually complying with Naomi's orders[113] and that she too was a good wife.[114] The authorial voice/s use this contrast, in which Ruth's first real characterisation comes across as a selfless and extremely loyal individual, in order to lay the groundwork for later events which become the justification for the honour Ruth receives as the bearer of the grandfather of King David.

The second contrast is between Ruth as a foreign woman and <u>any</u> Israelite woman. It immediately raises the question of why she is chosen to be the ancestress to such a great dynasty. The two rivals in this case are not actual characters in the story but the perception of the audience/readers of Ruth as a Moabitess, as she is referred to six times in the book,[115] and the nagging question is why any Israelite woman might not have been able to fulfill the same role. Some commentators wonder if the continual stressing of Ruth as the Moabite is not a direct comment on the exhortations against marrying foreign women found in Ezra/Nehemiah.[116] In Ezra-Nehemiah, the foreign wives must be put

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[113] Orders from females are not to be taken quite as seriously as those of men. This can be seen from the fact that a woman who adheres to her husband's wishes is considered an extremely good wife. There are exceptions, however-- Abigail, for instance, who recognised David for who he was while her husband did not. She contradicted her husband's orders both to maintain the honour and stability of her household and to recognise David. Consequently, she is viewed in an extremely good light-- so good that David later marries her.

[114] Until Ruth 1:14, Ruth and Orpah are always mentioned together. If Ruth is considered commendable and yet Orpah is still coupled with her, it follows that Orpah is not intended to be viewed in an extremely bad light but rather as a contrastive character.

[115] Ruth 1:22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10.

[116] Nehemiah 10:30; Ezra 9:1-2.

aside precisely because they are foreign. The foreign wives are not singled out as worshipping foreign gods, tempting their husbands away from the Lord, or not accepting the social and religious mores of Israel. Rather the concern of the authorial voice/s of Ezra-Nehemiah is the preservation of the homogeneity of the Israelite people. As a result, foreigners, under this worldview, are unacceptable in general. It is not simply a question of religious values.

The acceptance of foreign wives in the Book of Ruth may reflect a practice of marriage to foreign women among the Israelite upper class at the time. It may have been politically expedient for the upper classes, including the ruling elite, to sometimes contract foreign marriages. Joseph, Moses, and Davidic kings married outsiders.[117] These women were not presented badly in the literature because of their foreignness. Foreignness became an issue only when the foreign wives did not conform to the religious beliefs and standards of the ruling classes in Israel (and Judah).[118] Therefore, comparing Ruth to the Israelite woman who could have possibly taken her place serves only to show that unlike some other foreign wives, Orpah included, Ruth became fully Israelite- that is, she adopted the ways and the religious beliefs of her husband's people,[119] perhaps more fully than some, without being asked to do so. Her seeming acceptance of these beliefs already during her first marriage in Moab lends more credence to the completeness and validity of this acceptance.

**3.2 Rewarding *Hesed***

Ruth leaves Moab with Naomi because of her remarkable level of *hesed* to her mother-in-law and thereby to her husband's family. She shows through her movement to Israel that she is willing to remain within the rules of Israelite religion although Naomi

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[117] In Genesis 38, although Tamar was not actually married to Judah she was "married" to his family and produced two children from his line, as a foreigner their union could be assigned to this class. See also Genesis 46:20; Exodus 2:21; Numbers 12:1.
[118] For instance, Jezebel and Athaliah. Conversely, in Ezra-Nehemiah the foreign wives are to be rejected simply because of their foreignness. See discussion above.
[119] Ruth 1:16b.

has offered her a "divorce" because she felt it would be better for her daughters-in-law to go to their mothers' houses and find new husbands.[120] *Hesed* describes more than just loyalty of one person to another; it has the added component of social responsibility. Therefore Ruth refuses to give up the social obligations which she owes to her mother-in-law as the remaining head of the family, although to do so might possibly put Ruth in a better personal position (than she could otherwise obtain).

The head of the household can be viewed in the social hierarchy as being in the same structural place as the Lord because the head of the household is responsible for the lives of all those who are contained within the household, including family members, servants and livestock. Those in the household must also be responsible to the head by remaining in the household in whatever capacity they are designated. For instance, the wife would run the day to day domestic sphere of the house including control of workers, preparation of foodstuffs, and raising and educating the children among many other production efforts. In effect, it is a microcosm of the world in which the Lord is viewed as responsible for the protection of those whom he has created.

With Naomi assuming the head of household status, Ruth feels that she still owes loyalty and responsibility to her husband's family, since the household still exists, albeit in a much smaller and unusual format. Because Ruth still shows *hesed* to Naomi, who is now structurally in the same place as the Lord, Ruth shows *hesed* to the Lord as well. She feels a personal responsibility to support the Lord in the same way as the rest of Naomi's people feel it is proper. The movement of Ruth and Naomi from Moab to Bethlehem, combined with the return of Orpah to Moab and Ruth's final acceptance of Israelite ways as symbolised by her *hesed* to Naomi and the Lord, constitute the first stages of the change in Ruth's status from the Moabite wife of a dead Israelite husband to

[120] Ruth 1:15 for the "divorce", and 1:9, 11-13.

the Israelite ancestress of the Davidic line who is fully accepted by the Israelite community.

This characteristic reflects the same reward factor which is at work in the barren wife motif. In Hannah's, [121]Manoah's wife's,[122] and the Shunammite woman's[123] narratives, the barren wife is rewarded for her belief in the Lord as the controlling force behind both the fertility and the general well-being of human beings. In Sarah's (and Abraham's) case, the barren wife is the recipient of the promise made to Abraham because of his loyalty[124] (Sarah is considered to go along with Abraham's beliefs) to the Lord, a promise which was also received by Rebekah and Isaac. In Ruth's case, the promise is assumed to come to Ruth through her new husband Boaz as it is passed down through the generations. Ruth, as his wife, shares in this promise but she must be accepted as the "proper" mother for the descendants receiving the promise through her, like the matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah. Ruth's movement from Moab confirms her suitability although, despite her acceptance of the god of Israel, she is not yet an Israelite.

**3.3 Marriage to Boaz**

Other comparisons between Ruth and the barren wife motif can be drawn. Just like the barren wife, Ruth too is actively seeking a method by which her status within society can be raised. Her cleaving to her mother-in-law serves to increase her initial status in Israelite society. Although she is a foreigner, the people of Bethlehem see her as being supportive of their worldview, one in which Ruth's fortunes are tied with that of her husband's family, rather than her own.

Once in Bethlehem, Ruth, aided and abetted by Naomi, seeks to establish herself in the community. Naomi has roots there and so can call upon a certain amount of pity and familial duty to support herself if need be. However, neither she nor Ruth could rise

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[121] 1Samuel 1:17.
[122] Judges 13:23-24.
[123] 1Kings 4:13-17.
[124] Genesis 12:1-3; 17:15-19.

up in stature beyond a "charity case" in which they are forced to rely upon the goodwill of others. Ruth, therefore, takes full advantage of the interest which Boaz shows in her.[125] He has given Ruth a chance to at least eke out some kind of living for herself without the worry that she will be accosted. Boaz even goes so far as to tell the men to throw out bundles for her to glean,[126] thus allowing her access to better quality grain. Neither Ruth nor Boaz are looking to establish a marriage contract at this point. Boaz is just helping out a distant family member in distress and Ruth is gratefully accepting it.

It does not really matter-- for the purpose of establishing her status-- whether or not Ruth deliberately set out to find Boaz and entice him into marriage or just happened to meet him and decided that he was a very good prospect. From a literary standpoint, having Ruth pick by chance the field of a man who is a redeemer and a relative of Naomi makes their meeting providential, i.e. controlled by the Lord. At this point, Ruth's stature again rises because she is seen once more as a woman who is full of *hesed* towards both her husband's family in general and Naomi in particular. Ruth does what she can to ensure that they survive together rather than leaving Naomi alone to fend for herself. In doing so, Ruth faced the possibility of considerable hardship- the possibility of never raising herself up to a status higher than that of a wife of the dead. She takes this gamble and wins, the people of Bethlehem see the *hesed* she has and apply it to her status.

As a reward for all that Ruth has done to stand by her when she was no longer required to, and upon hearing that it was her kinsman (through her husband's line) Boaz's field in which Ruth was gleaning, Naomi develops a plan which might entice Boaz into asking Ruth to marry him. Boaz is a perfect match for Ruth. He too is described as being full of *hesed*[127] and this he confirms by his subsequent actions- he allows Ruth, a foreign widow, to glean far more than she is legally allowed too,[128] he extends his protection over

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[125] Ruth 2:6.
[126] Ruth 2:15-16.
[127] Ruth 2:1.
[128] Ruth 2:15-16.

her as though she were one of his other servants[129] and allows her take water from his workers.[130] Later, he agrees to marry her[131] and essentially to provide a child for Mahlon[132] through Ruth in order to provide Naomi with a *go'el*, a redeemer. That Boaz himself recognises that he and Ruth are of the same status is illustrated by his statement that all the people know of her *hesed*.[133] Boaz only provides the vehicle, i.e., marriage, through which Ruth's ascribed status becomes socially tangible.

**3.4 Ruth Bears a Special Son**

Ruth becomes the mother of a redeemer, both for Naomi and eventually for Israel.[134] This is her final and biggest reward on a larger scale for her extraordinary *hesed* towards Naomi and her new people and for her recognition of Naomi as her patron in Elimelech's stead. As for Naomi, her status rises because she is no longer the landless widow that she was when both her sons and her husband died in Moab and, as a consequence of the birth of Obed she is also no longer the head of a truncated household. Ruth's status rises even further because she gives up her only son to Naomi for her (Naomi's) protection - another example of extraordinary *hesed* on the part of Ruth.

As if all her *hesed* towards Elimelech's family was not enough to give this Moabitess high social status, Ruth becomes the ancestress of the founder of the Davidic kings. The fact that Ruth, as a foreign woman, is given the credit of being in the dynasty (although in a roundabout way through the narrative, not through a genealogy) shows just how highly thought of she was. By becoming not only the mother of a redeemer but also

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[129] Ruth 2:8-9.
[130] Ruth 2:9b.
[131] Ruth 3:13.
[132] Ruth 4:10.
[133] Ruth 3:11.
[134] Ruth herself does not know that her son will produce a redeemer for Israel but the readers/audience do.

the ancestress of a dynasty of kings, Ruth is accorded the highest position possible for any woman on the ladder of social status in ancient Israelite society.

Finally, Ruth's status as a full member of the community at an especially high level is not complete until the birth of her son whom she "gives up" to Naomi as her redeemer. She is now a mother and thereby fulfills her most important role in this society, but she also gives up this important role by giving Obed to Naomi-- when she has no actual guarantee of another child. This is the ultimate manifestation of her extreme *hesed*- Ruth provides a continuation for Elimelech's line through Naomi as the matriarch[135] while at the same time taking the chance that she will eventually find herself in the same position of being without offspring. Because of her sacrifices for her husband's family, Ruth's desire to put the good and the honour of the family before her individual welfare (she does not work outside of the realms of what "proper" women are allowed to do) and the great hardships that she may have had to face had she not been able to remarry in Israel give recompense to her. Ruth is rewarded with an important place in society, the knowledge that she went out of her way to support her dead husband's family, and the birth of a son who is of great importance to Israel. Through all this, she is left a greater legacy than any of the other characters because she is left a greater memory than can be found in a mere genealogy. Ruth is left with her name on an entire book and through it her story is told again and again.

In the Book of Ruth, the quest for social status and stabilization of position is more immediate than in the barren wife stories. The barren wife, because her husband has not yet died, has the freedom to plan for the future. The barren wife attempts to change her status level through a child/son so that she does not eventually have to face the predicament in which both Ruth and Naomi are situated. Ruth and Naomi, on the other hand actually find themselves in the unenviable position of having no family members

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[135] Ruth 4:10-12.

with obligations towards them, with the added likelihood of remaining members of one of the lowest classes of society. Through the ingenious attempts of both women to remind their family at large of their responsibilities toward them and through Ruth's *hesed*, they do succeed in obtaining sanctuary, as it were, for them both - a husband for Ruth and a son for Naomi through Ruth.

Albeit to varying degrees, there are elements of future promise and immediate need in both the barren wife motif and the Book of Ruth. For instance, the latter shows a concern for future need when the establishment of the Davidic kingship through Boaz and Ruth becomes evident. The promise of the Lord, a sort of divine version of the patron/client relationship, is continued on through Boaz's line even up to the kingship- in the eyes of this authorial voice at any rate. The obligations of the Lord's patronage partially pass on to the Davidic kingship. Illustrated by the need to introduce Perez and Tamar and Judah in both the "marriage" blessing[136] and the genealogy,[137] the idea that the Lord's promise continues through the line uninterrupted, although unusual in its progression at times, to arrive at the kingship is firm.

[136] Ruth 4:12.
[137] Ruth 4:18-22.

**Conclusion**

The most important characteristic shared by the barren wife stories and the Book of Ruth is the belief that the Lord is centrally involved in the events. In the former, He is unequivocally and directly responsible for the action. In the latter, while the Lord is always in the background because of the promise, He does not keep tight control over the movements and motivations of the characters. Accordingly, the authorial voice/s' viewpoint constantly suggests that the occurrences are the will of God, yet the characters never lose control of their own actions. For example, Ruth could have stayed in Moab, as did Orpah, and Boaz could have just as easily refused to marry her. However, the story would not have been quite so good and there would have been no David in such a case. The death of Elimelech and his sons, regardless of whether or not it reflected the Lord's punishment for their desertion of Israel,[138] sets the stage for the assumption that the Lord is the one responsible for the (mis)fortunes of all the characters. However, even when bad things happen, they are usually for good reasons. The authorial voice/s lets the readers/audience know that the Lord was the one who had planned for the eventual outcome-- i.e., the eventual transmission of the promise to Israel through Ruth and Boaz, their son (and Naomi) and, finally, the Davidic kings. The barren wife story works in a similar fashion because it conveys the miracle of a woman who could not give birth but who, through the kindness of the Lord, suddenly does. Thus, once again, her child becomes incredibly important to the history of Israel. The birth of a son so important could not be left to chance. As with the barren wife motif, the Book of Ruth ends with the birth of a great son for whom the Lord has planned, whom the wife has wanted, and from whom society will benefit.

The need for Boaz to be the father of Obed is seen by the genealogy at the end of chapter 4 where he is listed as Obed's father although the baby was supposed to have been

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[138] This is the explanation for their deaths in later writings but this explanation is not actually present in the MT.

given up to Mahlon's name.[139] It appears that Boaz's ancestors-- and not those of the deceased-- that precede Obed. Obed is still given up to Mahlon's name and Elimelech's line but only through Naomi as the sole survivor of the line. The authorial voice/s is therefore free to stress Boaz, with his impressive lineage, as the father. The usage of Boaz's lineage in Obed's genealogy also allows the authorial voice/s to by-pass Ruth's physical Moabite lineage by concentrating on Naomi's (and Elimelech's) and by stressing Ruth's marital ties to Naomi's family.

While the characterisation of Ruth in the Book of Ruth commonly calls to mind the notions of fidelity and strength, these characteristics are not often seen as being a part of the standard biblical portrait of motherhood. Even Ruth's commonalities with the barren wife motif are perceived less often. What is viewed as important in the role of motherhood, by this authorial voice/s, is the need to stress the containment of motherhood within "acceptable" societal bounds. These bounds are both circumscribed by the essentially patriarchal nature of ancient Israelite society and by the system in which status is acquired in ancient group-oriented societies. Both the barren wife motif and Ruth's characterisation tend to serve the same purpose by rewarding with status women who choose to become mothers, and by intimating that the Lord is somehow involved to a greater or a lesser extent. The barren wife motif and Ruth's character both stress a concern for the changing levels of status in which women of the Ancient Near East often found themselves. Finally, the end result of both characterisations is the same-- the birth of a long awaited son who redeems the mother and carries the promise of future glory for Israel.

The concern for and achievement of high status among their peers is essential to the barren wives and to the women, especially Ruth, in the Book of Ruth. The desire to increase their social status is based partially upon a need to be seen in as good a light as

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[139] Ruth 4:10.

possible, that is, for their own self-esteem. However, it is also important to the honour of the family that the women be known for deeds and actions which allow society to classify them as deserving of high social status. Group identification, as opposed to individualism, is the route through which social status is assigned to specific individuals. How the individual emphasises and supports the mores of his/her respective group has a direct relationship to the status levels of each member of the group, which again reinforces the desire of the members of the group to conform to these norms. One of the most important ways this conformity occurs is through the upkeep of a patronage system which in these narratives manifests itself as *hesed* or loyalty/social obligations, with particular stress on the familial situation.

Patron-client relationships in a familial setting create a forum in which women are not only allowed to increase their status through the maintenance of the honour of the household (here motherhood constitutes a major role) but are actively encouraged to do so. The adherence to societal norms, which is reflected in the growing honour of household members as a group or individually, also causes the *pater familias* and his entire household to increase status in the eyes of the community because of his "ability" to ensure that the basic norms are being followed by his family, especially in public.

The recognition of Ruth's character as a barren wife side by side with the more commonly viewed barren wives, such as Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, and others, has major implications for the interpretation of the Book of Ruth. Ruth's character is portrayed in much greater detail than many other characters in the Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament, including some males. She is portrayed as a woman who not only wants to be accepted by her dead husband's people but also as a woman who is fully capable of understanding the cultural means through which this is to be done. Ruth believes and abides by these societal rules-- as exemplified by her *hesed*, the ultimate in familial obligation and friendship This is recognised by the Bethlehemites at large who manifest their acceptance

of Ruth and Boaz's marriage.[140] Ruth's unquestioning acceptance of these rules, as attested early in the story when she refuses to leave Naomi[141] and stay in Moab, shows how dynamic and creative a character she really is.

[140] Ruth 4:11-12.
[141] Ruth 1:15-18.

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